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SUBJECT: AIR MOBILITY KEY TO SUCCESS IN COLOMBIA

¶1. (U) SUMMARY: Colombia has transformed itself into a secure, prosperous democracy and an even closer U.S. ally with our help. Many factors contributed to this successful transformation, but one of the most important was the provision of air mobility to the Colombian security forces. Air mobility allowed Colombia to project force and state presence throughout its vast area, providing greater security and setting the stage for social, economic, and judicial development. U.S. assistance to Colombia for air mobility is declining, and one of the biggest challenges for Colombia will be sustaining air mobility in order to maintain and expand the government's presence in all its facets. END SUMMARY

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Colombia Transformed In A Decade, the Numbers Tell It All  
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¶2. (U) In 1999, major narcotrafficking groups and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) threatened the sovereignty and governability of Colombia. The USG responded with support via Plan Colombia and Colombia responded with its own funding and political will. The transformation of Colombia in the last decade from a country that some thought could become a narco-state and others thought could become a FARC-controlled state has been impressive. By almost any metric available, Colombia has made incredible strides in transforming itself from a near-failed state to a democratic and more prosperous country. Between 2000 and 2007, the numbers are strikingly positive. Murders are down by 38%; kidnappings are down 86%; terrorist attacks are down 96%; attacks against pipelines are down 73%; attacks against towns are down 99%; more than 31,000 members of the leading paramilitary group demobilized and more than 15,000 narcoterrorists have deserted. On the "soft side", the numbers are also impressive. The poverty rate has declined by 20%; kilometers of paved roads have increased by 431%, primary education rate increased 15% and secondary education rate increased 50%; families receiving nutritional assistance increased 402%; and the economy's growth rate has almost doubled to 7.6%. There simply are no measurable areas in which the country is not better off today than it was ten years ago.

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What Made The Turnaround Possible?  
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¶3. (U) There are many reasons behind the dramatic turnaround. These include political will, increased GOC spending, worldwide rejection of terrorism post 9/11, professionalization of the military, police, and prosecutors; transition to an oral accusatory judicial system; demobilization of the AUC; improved intelligence capabilities; stopping the increase in coca cultivation;

extraditions to the U.S.; and U.S. developmental assistance. However, the overarching force multiplier behind the scenes that has made this dramatic change in Colombia possible is air mobility.

¶4. (U) In 1998, the Colombian Military Forces and Police had about two dozen helicopters to project force and provide assistance in a country the size of Texas and California combined. Colombia's current inventory is about 285 helicopters, with about half of these purchased with the GOC's own funds. These helicopters have made the critical difference in counterdrug efforts, in providing mobility to successful military operations, in the evacuation of wounded soldiers and civilians, and in helping establish legitimate state presence in rural areas by bringing in and supporting police, judicial, and civilian authorities after the military secured the areas.

¶5. (U) One of the most important lessons learned from Plan Colombia is that socio-economic development is not possible without security. Helicopters and other air assets have helped to deliver the security necessary for development and economic activity to succeed. Without security and reasonably safe access by civilian and governmental representatives, there can be no sustainable alternative development or state presence.

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Air Mobility Made the Difference  
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¶6. (U) Colombia east of the Andes is the size of Texas, but only has about 5% of the national population (2.2 million). Roads are scarce and in poor condition. At the same time, this territory has been part of the traditional homeland of the FARC and an area where the FARC earns significant income from coca cultivation and narcotrafficking in all its facets. Until the arrival of significant air assets, Colombia could not exert state control east of the Andes, and the armed forces were a garrison force, with a security strategy based on a bunker mentality, reacting to the FARC's actions. There were few proactive offensive operations and most of the residents in "Texas" believed that the FARC was the real government in that part of Colombia. The ten-fold increase in the number of helicopters allowed the GOC to project force and state presence to these far-flung areas and provided security for the full gamut of nation building activities. We might have made progress in Colombia without so many new air assets, but it would have been slower and many more lives would have been lost.

¶7. (U) Throughout the first half of the current decade, significant social and developmental projects were not possible in many Colombian departments, such as Putumayo, Vichada, Meta, and Guaviare. The security brought about by the Colombian security forces using air mobility has made these areas more secure, allowing other elements of the government to operate. Currently, there is a multiagency bilateral program in the area around the Macarena Park in Meta. This is the center of the FARC's traditional base and never before has the GOC or USG attempted significant developmental and judicial projects in this area. Because of improved and increased security, this program is moving forward, utilizing both military and civilian resources to guarantee consolidation and sustainability.

¶8. (U) The Colombian military and police, with USG assistance, have made great strides and are now one of the most professional and best trained and equipped militaries and police in the hemisphere. This was not always the case. At the end of the 1990's, Colombia's army was mainly one of conscripts and it was on the ropes. Some said that the FARC was as well-trained and equipped as the Colombian army, if not better. Although the FARC recently has suffered tremendous losses from the Colombian security forces, it still receives substantial revenue from illicit drug crops, which sustains the armed insurgency. However, the FARC has not been able to challenge Colombia's air mobility. The single biggest difference in the battlefield balance of power between the Colombian security forces and the FARC and other armed groups is that of air mobility. It is the force multiplier that allows the GOC to put their professional, well-trained and equipped troops where they need them, when they need them with protection from above. In addition, other aviation assets allow the GOC to provide the logistical support to keep the troops in place for as long as necessary. In 2002,

Colombia did not have a government presence in 158 of the then 1,098 municipalities and counties in Colombia. Today, the GOC has a presence in all 1,102 municipalities, which could not have happened without aviation assets that allowed the GOC to remove the enemy and then provide support for the sustainment of government presence.

¶9. (U) In addition to helicopters, Colombia has benefitted from fixed-wing air assets carrying sensors that provide intelligence information that allow commanders to plan their actions and direct the movement of the helicopters carrying the troops. There has also been an increase in logistical aircraft that maintains soldiers and police in the field longer and keeps readiness and morale up by providing a constant stream of food, ammunition, and medicines. An army marches on its stomach, and the Colombian Army would not march for long without support from aviation assets.

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The Future of Aviation in Colombia  
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¶10. (U) U.S. assistance has helped the GOC train hundreds of pilots and mechanics to fly and fix the almost 500 helicopters and fixed wing aircraft. Less than half of these were purchased by the USG. We are just now beginning to see the results of this Herculean effort. This has not been easy or fast, because training a pilot-in-command or a master mechanic for a helicopter often takes more than four years. In addition, the overall fleet is much larger than anyone could have predicted at the beginning of Plan Colombia. Over the next year Colombia will receive 15 UH-60 Black Hawk helicopters, and up to 15 additional helicopters of other models -- all purchased with GOC funding. These aircraft will require pilots and mechanics at a time when USG support for "hard side" aviation training and support activities is decreasing. Colombia's challenge will be to keep the operational readiness rate for existing and new aircraft at a level high enough, so that they can continue to make progress against the FARC and other narcoterrorists. Our nationalization plans are trying to take this into account, but planning is difficult for the controlled and moderate glide path needed to guarantee success and sustainability in an environment of budget cuts of almost 30% to aviation programs in fiscal year 2008.

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Air Mobility Will Be Needed, Even In Post Conflict  
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¶11. (U) As the Colombian military and police forces continue to make advances against the FARC, the smaller insurgent Army of National Liberation (ELN), and other narcoterrorists, the need for air mobility and logistical support is even greater. Even in an eventual post-conflict Colombia, roads will not be built overnight, and commercial air service will not immediately extend to remote areas. Colombia will need a robust aviation fleet to satisfy the needs of all sectors of the government. Already, the growing emphasis on manual coca eradication has led to a greater need for air support for this difficult and dangerous endeavor. There are not enough prosecutors and judges to totally cover Colombia, so Colombia will either need to take the judges and prosecutors to the public or bring the public to them. In either case, air assets will be needed. Colombia is subject to earthquakes, mudslides, tsunamis, major forest fires, and a plethora of other natural calamities. Facing these problems and providing humanitarian support and security requires aviation assets.

¶12. (U) Even as large illegal armed groups and transnational drug cartels are broken up, there will still be localized criminal groups that have the ability to cause serious disruptions to the lives of Colombians in remote areas. The GOC must be able to respond to such incidents swiftly if they are going to make the tremendous progress to date irreversible. Air mobility has been vital in accomplishing both USG and GOC goals over the last ten years. With or without USG support, Colombia will need to ensure a robust and efficient fleet of aircraft into the foreseeable future in order to continue to project, promote, and protect state presence.

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